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CHAUCER'S ALCESTE

The bounds of allegorical interpretation have never been fixed and are, indeed, unfixable. The burden of proof is, of course, on the advocate of any such interpretation; but the trouble is that, when a particular suggestion of this kind has been put into type, it becomes a kind of dogma, and everybody expects those who reject it to "preven the contrarye." Those unfortunate persons who, like myself, require a modicum of applicability in a supposed allegorical figure, are obliged to take the offensive. Yet to fight with an allegory is like wrestling with a phantom. In fact, I do not know how one can actually prove that Alceste in the Prologue to Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* does not stand for Queen Anne unless one can demonstrate that Queen Anne never did exist at all.

Still, something may be done to expose, I will not say the absurdity of the theory itself, but rather the absurdity which that theory ascribes to Chaucer.¹

May we not take it for granted that Chaucer at the age of forty-five or so, after a long course of reading in allegorical literature and a considerable production of such literature on his own part, was able to construct an allegory that should not stand in glaring contrast with the concrete facts of the case? And furthermore, is it not altogether probable that, in a complimentary identification, he would have instinctively shunned disagreeable implications? Surely he had at least the ordinary amount of tact.

Keeping these two points in mind, let us read the following passage:

"Hastow nat in a book, lyth in thy cheste,
The grete goodnesse of the quene Alceste,
That turned was into a dayesye:
She that for hir husbonde chees to dye,
And eek to goon to helle, rather than he,
And Ercules rescued hir, pardee,

¹ Compare the arguments of Professor Lowes in opposition to the current theory (*Publ. Mod. Lang. Assoc.*, XIX, 666 ff.), and of Professor Tatlock in support of it (*The Development and Chronology of Chaucer's Works*, pp. 102 ff.).

And broghte hir out of helle agayn to blis?"
 And I answered ageyn, and seyde, "Yis,
 Now knowe I hir! And is this good Alceste,
 The dayesye, and myn owne hertes reste?
 Now fele I wel the goodnesse of this wyf,
 That both after hir deeth, and hir lif,
 Hir grete bountee doubleth hir renoun!

—B, 510 ff.; A, 498 ff.

How is it possible that Chaucer should have written this if he meant Alceste to stand for a queen who was but nineteen or twenty years old, full of the joy of life, and the center of a brilliant court? Would she have been pleased? Would the king have accepted the picture as a graceful tribute to his much-loved wife? We may go farther. Would it have entered the mind of the king or the queen or any of the courtiers that Chaucer intended anything of the kind? I know this was the Middle Ages. Still, "men were flesh and blood and apprehensive" in mediæval times. Human nature does not seem to have changed a great deal in the last five or six hundred years. We can still understand Chaucer pretty well, and can generally surmise what he was driving at. But this passes everything. "Naught but itself can be its parallel."

Again, what a queer whimsy that was of the poet's, if he meant Alceste in the Prologue to be identified with Queen Anne, to put into her mouth the injunction—

And whan this book is maad, yive it the quene,
 On my behalfe, at Eltham or at Shene!

—B, 495-97.

If he had feared that some ingenious interpreter might fancy that Alceste *was* meant for Queen Anne, and had wished to forestall such a misapprehension, he could hardly have done it better. But, unfortunately, he did not reckon with us moderns, whom, when we are in hot pursuit of a source or a date, nothing short of a denial under oath will satisfy.

The passages just quoted are forcible enough in themselves, but their significance as applying only to the actual Alceste in her own proper character comes out with peculiar strength when we remember that Chaucer had already spoken of her in almost identical terms in the *Troilus*.

As wel thou mightest lyen on Alceste,
 That was of creatures—but men lye—
 That ever weren, kindest and the beste;
 For whanne hir housbonde was in iupartye
 To dye himself but-if she wolde dye,
 She chees for him to dye and go to helle,
 And starf anoon, as us the bokes telle.

—v, 1527 ff.

And later in the same book Chaucer looks forward to the time when he may perhaps celebrate Alceste in verse:

And gladlier I wol wryten, if yow leste
 Penelopeës trouthe, and good Alceste.

—v, 1777, 1778.

When Chaucer wrote these passages in the *Troilus* he certainly had no idea of equating Queen Anne with Alceste. Nobody contends that he had. It passes one's comprehension to understand how so infelicitous a notion should ever have entered his head afterward. Positive evidence in the affirmative is surely required in so extraordinary a case.

There is still another passage which throws some light upon the subject. Chaucer's plan was, apparently, to make the story of Alceste the concluding legend of the series. Love lays a specific injunction upon him to that effect:

But now I charge thee, upon thy lyf,
 That in thy legend thou make of this wyf,
 Whan thou hast othere smale ymaad before.

B, 548-50; A, 538-40.

Surely, if Alceste was understood by the court to be Queen Anne, this plan was fraught with embarrassments and perplexities of every kind. So long as Alceste was merely a character in an allegorical prologue, it is perhaps conceivable—barely conceivable—that Chaucer should have meant her to typify the queen. But how could such a clumsy and inapplicable fiction survive a concrete biographical narrative of the real Alceste's death and of her recovery from the Land of Shades? If Alceste is merely Alceste and nobody else, her story was, in every detail, eminently fitting as the acme of a series of examples illustrating the fidelity of women and their martyrdom in the cause of love. As soon as

Alceste became a surrogate for Queen Anne, her story lost all its force. No matter how faithful and devoted the queen was in her character of young and loving wife, she had never achieved the martyr's crown, nor is there any likelihood that she aspired to it.

But this is not all. Gower's vision of Venus and Cupid, in the eighth book of the *Confessio Amantis*, reminds one forcibly of the Prologue to Chaucer's *Legend*. The question of indebtedness need not here be raised,¹ but one thing may be asserted without fear of contradiction: Gower must have recollected the Prologue when he was writing the vision. Not to speak of general resemblances, we have a "flower and leaf" passage, and a message from the Goddess of Love bidding Chaucer write a poem. Now among the others who were present at Love's court Gower saw four women—

Whos name I herde most commended:
Be hem the Court stod al amended;
For wher thei comen in presence,
Men deden hem the reverence,
As thogh they hadden be goddesses,
Of all this world or emperesses.

—viii, 2607 ff.

These, he heard, were "the foure wyves whos feith was proeved in her lyves." They were Penelope, Lucrece, Alceste, and Alcyone.

Lo, these foure were tho
Whiche I sih, as me thoghte tho,
Among the grete compaignie
Which Love hadde for to guye.

—viii, 2657 ff.

Alceste, it will be noticed, is the third in order. Gower has already told her story at greater length in the seventh book.² In neither place does he mention her restoration to life.

It is quite certain that, if Chaucer's Alceste had been meant for the queen or had been so understood by the court of Richard II, Gower would have been aware of it. He was a court poet, too, and the *Confessio* was written by royal command. His

¹ See M. Bech, *Das Verhältniss der "Confessio Amantis" zur Legende of Goode Women* (*Anglia*, V, 365 ff.).

² vii, 1917 ff.

introduction of Alceste in this place is certainly reminiscent of Chaucer's *Legend*. Yet it is perfectly clear that Gower's Alceste is simply herself, with no ulterior allegorical significance. This might count for little, perhaps, under ordinary circumstances, but the circumstances are by no means ordinary. Several of the heroines of Chaucer's *Legend* are present, Troilus and Criseide are there,¹ the story of Cleopatra's being torn to pieces in a pit of serpents is mentioned,² and finally Gower receives a mandate which he is to deliver to Chaucer, Venus' "disciple and poet."³ I think we have good reason to infer that if Chaucer meant Alceste for Queen Anne, none of his contemporaries recognized the intention. And I do not wonder.

G. L. KITTREDGE

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¹ viii, 2531.

² viii, 2571 ff.

³ viii, 2941* ff.